

Bias in Popular Culture: The Power of Visual and Linguistic Narratives

ANAS AL-SHAIKH-ALI

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Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali persuasively argues in his book *Bias in Popular Culture: The Power of Visual and Linguistic Narratives*, that popular culture has the power to fuel antisemitism and Islamophobia as well as to cultivate humility and understanding. Al-Shaikh-Ali describes the many forms popular culture may take, from fiction, films, TV, essays, tales, poems, and travelogues to cartoons. Popular culture is a mechanism through which the meaning of current events and the retelling of history depend upon the lens applied. He demonstrates how paintings, sketches, illustrations, or artwork can be added to narratives to shape the imagination and evoke particular senses. While skewed or false narratives around groups of people are usually associated with news media, Al-Shaikh-Ali draws attention to the powerful role popular culture plays because it is usually thought of as harmless or neutral. It is both consumed and dismissed as entertainment.

The shaping of views can generate particular emotional responses, whether fear and contempt or love and compassion. These in turn can motivate actions that affect individuals or entire communities. In the most viewed TedTalk to date, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Adiche warns that a single story put forward by media and literature can misrepresent people and communities, often by generalization and the assumptions inherent in the narrative. Adiche connects the single story to the exercise of power. Al-Shaikh-Ali argues that stories may carry greater impact through popular culture because of its political influence on communities. The effect can be global in scope because the medium is readily consumed as entertainment. This book is particularly timely in light of the growing political polarization that is becoming a global phenomenon.

The role of popular culture is often neglected when analyzing the political realm, where the power to influence perspectives may be within the public or the private sphere. Al-Shaikh-Ali’s central focus in the book is on how Islam and Muslims are usually defined and described. He argues that popular culture more often plays a negative role in shaping the views and behavior of people toward Islam and Muslims relative to academic discourse or deliberate policies. These all have the power, even cumulatively so, to depict a single story and define individuals and groups in narrow and

harmful ways. He points out that Islam has “been defined as the dominant problem of the modern era” (p. 214).

As with antisemitism, he contends that Islamophobia results from 1) the practice of “othering” and rhetoric of exclusion, 2) ignoring the spectrum of narratives or the multiplicity of stories (at the expense of nuance and context), and 3) the exaggerated attention that leads to fearmongering “impeding real debate and stifling cohesive social relations” (p. 214). He further argues that while modern popular culture is fluid, it is imperative to recognize that the negative narrative around Islam and Muslims has historically been the default. This reflects a deeply embedded bias that has been recreated throughout history. Negative stereotypes are reinforced by referencing past assumptions that are taken as accurate. The author notes that “key metaphors, themes, motifs, and literary tropes surface again and again, maintaining a historical continuity from past to present” (p. xix).

The book is divided into three sections. Following an Introduction, the first is *Public Opinion and Political Influence: The Soft Power of Popular Fiction*; the second is *The ‘Art’ of Cognitive Bias: Hate Discourse and the Power of Images*; and third is *Killer Narratives in Popular Culture: The Communication of Violence*. An Epilogue titled *Historical Imaginings and Modern Hostilities: From ‘Barbarian’ and ‘Turk’ to ‘Terrorist’* concludes the book. In the first section, Al-Shaikh-Ali evaluates the significant role of popular culture in framing the Other, looking at fiction related to politics, intelligence, invasion stories, and even prophecies. This section offers a tedious review of numerous techniques that have been employed in various contexts. This nevertheless allows the reader an opportunity to understand how these methods are employed by governments, nations, groups, and individuals in regarding others in general, whether Muslim or otherwise. However, the author concludes, “using smoke mirrors to feign fictional events as actual possibilities, and to project Muslims as lying hotheads with an axe to grind, writers have taught ‘us’ that ‘our’ motives are always right and just, and that ‘our’ position by definition is always correct” (p. 55).

Dealing with unconscious (implicit or cognitive) bias in the second section, the author defines the topic by referencing President Kennedy’s observation of “myth,” that is, as “an irrational and limited way of thinking reinforced by the persistent repetition of past prejudices which feed into a flawed interpretation of reality based on subjective interpretation, rather than rational judgment” (p. 58). Also covered thoroughly with examples in this section is the manner in which unconscious bias undergirds much of

the framing of the Other and determines how one treats others. The author approaches the topic instructively, which makes much of the material in this section a solid resource for anyone seeking to learn about or teach on the topics of unconscious bias, colonization, and decolonization.

Beyond unconscious bias infiltrating narratives, there are numerous techniques to purposefully manipulate, influence, and control thinking and action. While these feature in the last section, they are woven throughout the book. In an endeavor to help us identify the mechanisms that divide us, the author offers evidence for these willful techniques and provides an examination of this persistent bias in popular culture. His examination is mainly from the 1970s forward, as he maintains several events have compounded to create a broad narrative on Islam and Muslims that continues to escalate. Citing Henry T. Conserva and offering other evidence, Al-Shaikh-Ali offers a long list that includes: name-calling; glittering generalities; transfer (“using something that is respected and linking it to that which is to be accepted” (p. 224)); testimonial; appeal to authority; the bandwagon (everyone or large numbers are doing something, so to convince by numbers); plain folks (“the propagandist is like the rest of us” (p. 224)); stacking the deck; strawman (“producing a weak version of the opposing argument” (p. 224)); appeal to fear; black-and-white fallacy; false dilemma; sweeping generalizations; depicting a slippery slope; offering a rhetorical question, assertion, misquoting, either/or fallacy, faulty cause and effect, appealing to ignorance; equivocation, and; what he refers to as the Red Herring, or unwarranted extrapolation (see p. 225).

The book’s last section chronicles and analyzes how the evolution of popular culture is making it more difficult to draw boundaries between fantasy and reality. The danger in such blurring and expansion of the genre into bifurcated forms is intensified by the frequency. Al-Shaikh-Ali warns “popular culture has entered into almost every arena of our daily lives, and notably in our engagement with others and the Other. Therefore, its scrutiny becomes all the more imperative” (p. 210). While the research in this section is extensive, it does not engage the multitude of social media platforms that mesmerize over half the world’s population (TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are a few examples). These forms take entertainment to a whole new level, and if one were to analyze these platforms, one would likely find similar patterns of misinformation and dangerous representations. The author, however, does underscore the greater danger posed by the speed at which information is now disseminated and the instruments available to do so.

Al-Shaikh-Ali is not blind to the role some Muslims play in creating negative stereotypes. Propaganda and misinformation about Islam and Muslim communities are not entirely the doing of non-Muslims. In fact, Al-Shaikh-Ali carefully details how the perceptions of Muslims were constructed in nineteenth-century American popular culture through their own Othering. The author in particular holds responsible fringe elements within Muslim communities and radical Islamist preachers, who are then often exploited. He contends that such hardline Muslim groups have made it difficult for Muslim communities in, for example, Europe to counter Islamophobic perspectives. He laments that in his home city of Mosul, Iraq, ISIS, and other extremists have contributed to schisms within previously peaceful and connected communities. For him, these individuals have engendered fear that the Western way of life is under attack, which in turn has translated into a global threat. He argues this is “a false narrative but with the media and popular culture echoing it, it spectacularly binds entire Muslim communities and nations into one monolithic ideology” (p. 217).

While all humans are unconsciously biased, employing techniques to alter and manipulate the truth is willful. To counter these stereotypes and prejudices, Al-Shaikh-Ali urges people not to contribute to the fostering of misinformation, fear, and hate. He advises people not to give support to the framing and practices that undermine multiculturalism and instead encourage people to unite by a common purpose and universal values. He avers that people can stand with courage at both grassroots and intellectual levels and notes people already are doing so, namely, in the fight against antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The sections of the book that deal with unconscious bias are quite instructive in helping the reader more easily recognize its manifestations. What do we do with the knowledge that we are all biased, and that much of the information we receive from popular media is depicted by biased individuals? More significantly, how are those of us with positive intentions nonetheless co-creating narratives through the lenses we ourselves have acquired and perhaps never questioned? Al-Shaikh-Ali does state at the outset “I leave it available for anyone to pick up from where I have left off” (p. xxiii) and offers that each section of the book can be taken further in numerous directions. It is on this topic that yet perhaps more could have been offered in the way of overcoming one’s own unconscious bias to begin peeling back the proverbial onion of bias to make the world a better place.

This is an important and timely book for literary scholars. Anthropologists, scholars of race studies, global studies, international relations,

ethics, and DEI issues will also find it useful. The book offers an important critique of popular culture's epistemological shortcomings and the ethics around developing knowledge pertaining to groups of people. The notion of how a single story filtered through a particular lens can affect one's understanding while omitting a myriad of other stories has significant cultural and political impacts. As Al-Shaikh-Ali illustrates, bias in popular culture, even in a localized sphere, can have far-reaching consequences in an increasingly polarized world.

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